DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 123 EA 018 961

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TITLE The Question of Full-Time Trustees.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
JOURNAL CIT Ontario Education; p6-10 Mar-Apr 1982

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Boards of Education; Compensation (Remuneration); Conflict of Interest; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Governance; Government School Relationship; *Leadership Responsibility; *Policy Formation; School Community Relationship; Surveys; *Trustees
IDENTIFIERS *Ontario

ABSTRACT

In light of issues surrounding control of local school boards in Ontario, Canada, this opinion survey of 197 board trustees was conducted to determine support for full-time trustee representation. Questionnaires--sent by stratified random sampling--solicited demographic, geographic, and personal information and sought trustees' opinions on whether they should serve their communities full-time. The researchers hypothesized that most trustees, who are elected, disfavor a full-time role and that those in support represent a vocal minority. Trustees in this minority have complained that control has been wrested from communities and that trustees lack time and adequate remuneration. Of 197 respondents, 86 percent disagree with the concept of full-time trusteeship. Over one-half in support are female and are not employed full-time. Those desiring full-time representation cite time problems and complex bureaucracy. Primary support for full-time representation came from trustees of large urban school boards. Small or rural school boards do not offer support. Ninety-five percent who disagree emphasize that quality community representatives can be recruited, and 85 percent who disagree are employed full-time. Results confirm the hypothesis that a majority of Ontario trustees do not perceive that their role is to serve as full-time community representatives. (CJH)

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THE QUESTION OF FULL-TIME TRUSTEES

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INTRODUCTION

Local governance of education by elected school board trustees is a North American tradition. In Ontario, the role of elected representatives, especially in urban areas, has received considerable discussion but limited research. It is certainly an area about which there seems to be no consensus. In 1981, the deputy minister of education appointed a committee to examine the role of the school trustee and its' report was published in May of 1981. Although many concepts were examined, the question of full-time trustee representation was not addressed. At trustee conferences and in recent media reports, some trustees have claimed that the role has become so complex that school trustees should be full-time representatives of their communities. In order to test this opinion, a stratified random sampling of thirty-six Ontario school boards was conducted and the opinions of the trustees elected to those boards were surveyed. It was hypothesized by the researcher that those who support the concept of full-time trustees represent a vocal minority of elected school board members.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Ontario, the literature seems to indicate that the lay control of local school boards has moved through three distinct phases of evolution and now appears to be entering a fourth phase in its cyclical development.

Phase I: Lay Control

This early phase was characterized by thousands of small school boards which were governed and controlled by many more thousands of elected or municipally-appointed trustees who served their respective communities on a part-time basis and without any form of remuneration. The trustees were representatives of their local constituencies and they controlled every aspect of the school's organization and administration.

Phase II: Provincial Control

This phase developed as the direct result of sustained efforts by individual reformers, dramatic population growth, urbanization, immigration, taxation of real property to support education, government grants, bureaucratization of the provincial school system, demands by the people for equal access to public education, and a strong provincial government with absolute power and control over education which was granted to it by **The British North America Act, 1867.** During this phase, a complex network for the provincial inspection of schools and school systems, teacher education programs, general legislative grants, external examinations and bureaucratic authority centralized the control of education by provincial bureaucrats.

Phase III: Control By Local Professionals

With the increase in the size of city and suburban school boards and the on-going consolidation of small school boards to form larger units of administration, local school board trustees found that they required assistance with the day-to-day operation of the schools within their jurisdictions. Colleges and faculties of education recognized this need and they turned their attention to the training of hundreds of professional experts in educational administration who were hired by the local education authorities. This reliance on "experts" and the structural and bureaucratic modifications to the school systems appeared to reduce the influence and control by locally-elected trustee representatives. As the goal of Phase III appeared to be the stability of the rapidly growing systems rather than social change, demands that the school be more responsive and representative of the populace became more evident in the later stages of Phase III.

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Phase IV: Demand For Community Control

In school governance literature, in the media, and at trustee conferences today, a number of researchers and school board trustees complain that the local control of schools has been wrested from lay control, first by the provincial bureaucratic authorities and second, by their own administrators. They claim that: 1) agenda-setting has become a virtual professional monopoly; 2) administrators occupy a "gate-keeping" position in the political and communication structures; 3) the publics, including the trustees, have little knowledge of the educational issues; 4) administration maintains private communication links within their own professional organization and with Ministry of Education officials; 5) administration possesses educational expertise which trustees lack; 6) the composition of school board membership changes regularly at each election while those holding positions in the bureaucratic authority structure remain constant; 7) trustees who hold full-time occupations in the community do not have the time or the expertise to do their job thoroughly; and 8) trustees do not receive adequate remuneration to provide continuous and effective community control when they serve their constituents on a part-time basis.

RATIONALE

In light of the issues which are expressed above, this research is an attempt to determine the support for the concept of full-time trustee representation by surveying the opinions of Ontario school board trustees who were elected in December of 1980. Proponents and critics of the concept were asked to provide arguments for their support or non-support of the proposition. In the research design, it was hypothesized that a greater percentage of trustees do not see their role as full time and that those who do favour the concept represent a vocal minority.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

Although a survey of all trustees in Ontario is desirable, it was decided that a stratified random sample would be adequate. In the total population of approximately 150 school boards and 1800 trustees, 36 school boards with 558 trustees were selected and surveyed. Included within the stratified random sample are public and separate school boards from all six Ministry of Education geographical regions, boards with large and small student populations and boards which are located in urban and rural areas.

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the proposition that "Elected School Board Trustees In Ontario Should Serve Their Communities As Full-Time Representatives". As proponents or critics of the concept, the trustees were asked to provide reasons for their support or non-support. From each respondent, demographic information such as the geographical region location, student enrolment in the system, the number of trustees on the Board, and the kind of community served was requested. In addition, personal information with respect to the trustees' sex, age, occupation, electors whom they represent, and their experience as trustees was obtained. Questionnaires were provided in both English and French.

Because the researcher did not have the names of the elected trustees who are serving on the thirty-six school boards, letters were sent to the chairmen of the school boards requesting their cooperation in the distribution of the questionnaire to the board members. Self-addressed and postage-paid envelopes were provided for the return of the questionnaire.

Responses to the one open-ended research question were submitted to a panel of three judges in order to arrive at major categorizations of support and non-support for the proposition. Membership in the categories is not statistically correlated with the independent variables of school board and personal data although a percentage reference is made to them with respect to agreement and disagreement with the proposition.

FULL-TIME TRUSTEES

FINDINGS

Questionnaires were returned by 197 respondents representing 37 percent of the 558 trustees in the sample. Although a 50 percent return is considered statistically acceptable for a survey questionnaire, a 37 percent return is generally regarded as significant when a random sampling technique is employed. Table 1 depicts the distribution and the rate of return of the questionnaire from the (six) Ministry of Education geographical regions.

TABLE 1
Questionnaire Distribution and Returns

REGIONS	Number of boards	Public school trustees	Separate school trustees	Total	Total return	Percentage return
Central	13	185	37	222	70	32%
Eastern	6	52	43	95	42	44%
Mid-northern	3	22	14	36	23	64%
North-eastern	5	42	16	58	14	24%
North-western	3	29	9	38	18	47%
Western	6	47	42	89	30	34%
Totals	36	377	161	538	197	37%

Of those who replied, 170 trustees or 86 percent of the respondents disagree with the concept of full-time trusteeship. Twenty-seven trustees or 14 percent of the respondents agree with the proposition. This non-support by a majority of the trustees seems to support the researcher's hypothesis that only a small minority believe that their role should be full-time. Even among this latter group, many added the qualification that adequate remuneration would need to be guaranteed and that the number of trustees who are elected to school boards would need to be reduced before they would consider being full-time school board members. The demographic data indicate that more than one-half of those who support full-time representation are female, are not employed full-time and are either retired or self-employed persons.

It should be noted, however, that even among the 170 trustees who do not support the concept there are forty-two females or 25 percent of the respondents who disagree, including twenty-one who list their occupation as housewife, fifteen others who are not employed full time, six retired persons and four who are self-employed.

The major argument put forward by those who desire full-time representation is the time factor. They believe that educational issues have become so complex that more preparation time for decision making is essential if they are to become more effective as policy makers. The complex nature of the current education bureaucracy and the control which is exercised by the professionals within the organization are deemed to be unsatisfactory to them. Many others feel that trustees need to make more educated decisions and that they should not merely "rubber stamp" the recommendations which are put forward regularly by their administrators. Although the trustees who support the concept of full-time trustees recognize their role as policy makers, they appear to be convinced that they should have more influence on the day-to-day operation of the schools. The primary support for full-time representation came from trustees who are elected to large urban school boards in general and boards of education in particular. There is no support from school boards who are either small or rural in their composition.

Of those who disagree with the concept, 95 percent are concerned with what they expect should be the role of the trustee. They emphasize that: trustees are policy makers and not administrators; there is no apparent urgent need for trustees to be full time; there is currently not enough for trustees to do; and a much better quality representative of the community can be attracted to the position if trustees continue to be elected on a part-time basis. In this light, the respondents indicate that many groups of professionals in society would unlikely be interested in the trusteeship if they were required to serve full time.

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FULL TIME TRUSTEES

Fifty percent of the respondents indicate that: the size of the present school board bureaucracy is already too large and full-time trustees would increase the administrative structure which is constantly expanding; role conflict with the professional administrators would be inevitable; and trustees serving on a full-time basis would interfere too much with the administrators in the daily operation of the schools. Many respondents indicate that they have hired well-qualified experts in educational administration with input from the communities which they represent.

More than 30 percent of the respondents are concerned with the high cost which would be involved with full-time trusteeship and that the over-burdened taxpayer should not be expected to pay for these additional administrative and bureaucratic expenses. Many feel that the money would be better spent in improving the school programs and, unless the remuneration is high enough, the quality of candidate attracted to the position would be questionable. Although cost is a concern, many respondents indicate strongly that the present system of remuneration is most inadequate when comparisons are made with their elected counterparts who serve on municipal councils.

Eighty-five percent of the respondents who do not support full-time representation are currently employed full-time in various occupations and more than one-half of them appear to be in occupations which represent the upper levels of Canadian society. Although the large urban school boards make up the greatest number of trustees in the sample and therefore represent the majority of those who disagree with the proposition, almost 100 percent of the trustees from small, rural and separate school boards oppose the concept of full-time trustee representation.

CONCLUSION:

The results of the study appear to confirm the hypothesis that support for the concept of full-time trustees seems to represent a demand from a small and vocal minority, most of whom, live in central, eastern or western Ontario and are members of large urban school boards. There is almost total rejection of the proposition from northern regions, small school boards, and separate school boards.

Although many respondents are concerned with providing strong community representation and with exercising fiscal and policy-making control over the school board operation, it is evident from the study that a majority of Ontario trustees do not see their role as full-time representatives of their community.